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HIV/AIDS is one of the biggest health problems facing the world today, and no one is beyond its reach. More than 9,168 Hoosiers are currently living with HIV disease and this pandemic has ended the lives of 4,698 people in Indiana over the past 30 years. Other sexually transmitted diseases, or STDs, such as Chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis continue to be a problem for Hoosiers, as well. In 2007, there were 20,300 cases of these diseases reported in Indiana among women alone. It is estimated that one in 12 people worldwide are infected with either Hepatitis B or C, which is transmitted in much the same ways as HIV and other STDs.

### **Assessing personal risks**

HIV and Hepatitis B and C are transmitted through body fluids of an infected individual. These body fluids include blood, semen, vaginal fluids and breast milk (HIV only). Anytime there is an exchange of these body fluids, whether it is sexual activity (oral, vaginal or anal) or needle sharing, the risk for infection exists. STDs can be spread during sexual activity through body fluids or skin to skin contact, as is the case with herpes and genital warts.

HIV does not discriminate by age, race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status. Everyone, and I mean everyone, should assess their personal risks. Certain groups are at increased risk, including sexually active women and youth.

Many people are embarrassed about discussing issues like HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, or STDs, and most with these diseases feel stigmatized. Now it the time to remove the stigma associated with having HIV/AIDS or other STDs. It is important for health care providers and their patients to have open and frank discussions about the patient's personal risks, and how the patient can protect himself/herself and their loved ones.

### **Knowing your status: Get tested**

Testing is the only way to know for certain if a person has HIV, hepatitis, or an STD. There are often no signs or symptoms until the disease has progressed and caused serious, often irreparable damage such as AIDS, infertility, and liver failure. Early diagnosis and treatment are the best weapons in fighting any of these diseases. While there are only cures for Chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis, early detection through testing can improve the effectiveness of treatments for HIV, hepatitis, and other STDs, and allow for improved quality of life.

### **Talking to family and friends about their risks**

One way to decrease the rate of infection is to make knowledge as contagious as the diseases we are trying to prevent. Health care providers should encourage their patients to talk frankly and openly with family and friends about sexuality, risks factors, and the importance of being tested. Increased communication not only spreads knowledge and awareness but can go a long way in minimizing the stigma attached to so many of these diseases.